

South Border

December 2022

The Costa Rica–Panama border is 348 km long and there are only four border posts on the Costa Rica side in Sixaola, Sabalito, Golfito and Paso Canoas as the main one. Due to its length, the southern border is very difficult to monitor in its entirety.

In 2021, UNHCR Costa Rica resumed border monitoring activities, primarily in Paso Canoas.

In 2022 UNHCR supported the government in hiring an Eligibility Officer due to the increase in the number of asylum seekers at the Southern Border.

Considering the situation, a Protection Associate was posted in **May 2022** in Paso Canoas to guarantee the effective protection of asylum seekers, refugees, at risk of statelessness and stateless persons who enter or reside on the Southern Border.

Operational Context:

During 2022 there was an important increase in comparison to 2021; 97,314 people in mixed movements left the Migratory Reception Station (ERM) in Los Planes, Gualaca (in 2021 = 126,512 people and in 2022 = 223,826 people) to enter through the south border. This increase reached its peak in the second semester of the year. The persons in mixed movements arrive at the Paso Canoas border and slowly enter Costa Rica irregularly since many require Visas (Venezuelans, Haitians). They remain in the area for a day or two to rest and then continue their journey north by bus if they have the means, if they don't, they wait until some other family in their country of origin can provide finances to continue or they participate in informal labour. Most were continuing north but after October, when the new migration process for the United States was announced, a significant number of people were left stranded in Costa Rica.



Protection needs:

Most of the people in these mixed movements show high levels of fatigue, many of them have skin lacerations and allergies, as well as gastrointestinal problems. The presence of homeless family groups during their transit through Costa Rica is constant. Likewise, due to the deteriorated state of health, it is common to identify children in need of attention. The majority of people travel by public transport in family groups, with few resources and few health protection measures.

Also, there was a significant lack of shelter in Paso Canoas and Ciudad Niely, so people would sleep on the streets, install tents in the bus terminal and nearby facilities. There was a lack of information to guide people who were entering Paso Canoas, which was exploited by smugglers to mislead them into taking their services at high costs.

Working with Partners

- UNHCR has strengthened collaboration with the authorities such as the Migration Authority, Professional Migration Police, Border Police, San Vito Municipality, Local Police, Ministry of Health, the Costa Rica Bar Association, and the Children's National Welfare Institute.
- UNHCR carried out border monitoring in Golfito, Río Sereno, where the migration stations (DGME) are located and to areas of transit such as, Ciudad Neily, Río Claro, Puerto Jimenez.
- UNHCR participated in 4 health fairs implemented by the Hands for Health Foundation, accompanied by Red Cross and HIAS. UNHCR assisted in providing information, referrals to health points and legal advice.
- UNHCR has kept a close working relationship with HIAS on the ground. Joint visits were made to the border in Río Sereno, Municipality of Coto Brus and at the border post of Paso Canoas

Main Activities

Protection

- In 2022, UNHCR prioritized hiring of a Protection Associate that is currently posted in Paso Canoas. He conducts border monitoring activities and attention to the people we serve in the area, to guarantee effective access to territory and to the RSD process.
- UNHCR was included in the Permanent Commission for Assistance to Migrants in Vulnerable Conditions (COPPAMI), a commission that comprises institutions active in the border area and in the municipalities of Corredores, province of Puntarenas, and Barú, province of Chiriquí, linked to the protection and assistance of vulnerable migrants, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.



- The Municipality of Coto Brus, with assistance from UNHCR, made significant progress with the preparation of the Municipal Migration Policy, with the general objective of strengthening the coordinated system of inter-institutional and intersectoral actions in the canton of Coto Brus to guarantee the protection of the human rights of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees who transit, live and return to the canton during 2022-2032.

- UNHCR accompanied Health Fairs led by the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) by providing information to people in need of international protection. These fairs provide a comprehensive approach in health to people in vulnerable conditions who transit the

Southern Border of Costa Rica, focusing on four geographical points: Paso Canoas, Río Claro, Río Sereno and Ciudad Neily.

- UNHCR facilitated capacity-building spaces on International Refugee Law, UNHCR programs and awareness-raising aimed at the Public Force, Professional Migration Police, Border Police and Tourism Police.
- UNHCR, in coordination with the Delegation of the Public Force of Paso Canoas, installed a permanent tent to provide information and humanitarian assistance to people in transit.

UNHCR is grateful for the support provided by donors contributing to this operation.



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